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The French mainstream and the Front National's electoral fortune

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During the last three decades, the *Front National* (FN) was the most successful populist radical right (PRR) party in Western Europe. Notwithstanding the predictions of this PRR party's imminent collapse, FN has since 2007 managed to reverse their downturns and attained new peaks of electoral support at both the 2002 and 2012 ballots. Within this context, the chapter explores potential interrelationship between the French mainstream's strategic choices regarding immigration control and integration, and the FN's subsequent electoral fortunes. The chapter identifies a growing discrepancy between increased levels of salience during the electoral campaigns and contracting levels of public concern and hostility toward immigration and integration. This trend reflects the mainstream parties' departure from the dismissive strategies adopted in the 2002 election throughout the following presidential ballots whilst the FN maintained its anti-immigration discourse

The literature recurrently emphasises the effects of electoral systems for the emergence and electoral consolidation of PRR-type parties (Mudde, 2007). Electoral rules contain a different set of political opportunity structures that influences public behaviour and party strategies (Kitschelt, 1995). The French Presidential elections develop on the basis of single-member constituencies under a dual ballot system, wherein only the two most successful candidates of the first round proceed to the second round. This 'two-ballot-majority-plurality' system disincentives the electorate from wasting their votes on minor parties and conversely encourages tactical voting (Givens and Luedtke, 2005). Nonetheless, this institutional constraint has not detracted a significant share of the French electorate from voting in favour of FN candidates – initially, for Jean Marie Le Pen and, then, for his daughter Marine Le Pen - at the first round of the presidential ballots. Considering the limits of institutional approaches towards the French context, this chapter explores the relationship between the FN's electoral results at the presidential ballots and the agency of mainstream parties.

A close association has previously been established between the FN's electoral inroads and the salience of immigration and integration related questions among the French electorate (see e.g. Mayer and Perrineau, 1996). FN's electoral breakthrough in the mid-1980s has been explained with reference to issues related with the growing proportion of migrants and ethnic minorities in France (Kitschelt, 1995). Elsewhere, Mayer (2007) suggests that FN's supporters are distinctive in their authoritarianism and hostility towards immigration, a trait which constituted the strongest predictor of support for the PRR. In the face of this significant electoral challenge immigration and integration thus constitute a strategic dilemma for the electoral strategies pursued by the French mainstream.

Previous research has associated these developments with the mainstream parties and their strategic behaviour vis-à-vis the PRR contender (Meguid, 2008). Whereas a dismissive strategy was pursued throughout the 1970s, a substantial shift happened in the mid-1980s following FN's electoral breakthrough. The then president, François Mitterrand, adopted a two-pronged approach which involved a halt to labour migration alongside a commitment to migrant integration to challenge the FN's anti-immigration stances (Meguid, 2008). By keeping the immigration 'issue' on the political agenda, Parti Socialiste (PS, Socialist Party) reinforced FN's issue-ownership of opposition to this question and divided the right-wing vote to the benefit of the centre-left. After a late reaction to FN's emergence, the centre-right party - Rassemblement pour la République (RPR, Rally for the Republic) - embraced an accommodative strategy towards FN. Nonetheless, this strategy was undermined by intraparty divisions, contradictory policy developments, and, especially, by PS' adversarial strategy that enhanced FN's issue-ownership of opposition to immigration (Meguid, 2008, p. 190).

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first contextualises FN's electoral development up until the 2000s and discusses its' ideological cornerstones. The following sections explore patterns of interparty competition at the 2002, 2007 and 2012 presidential ballots, and the potential causal linkages between those patterns and levels of electoral support for FN. The conclusion assesses the overall relevance of Odmalm and Hepburn's (2017) hypotheses, namely, that there are no differences between mainstream parties regarding their positions on immigration and integration (H1); if the political mainstream does not offer at least one party that proposes a more restrictive and a more assimilationist outcome, then the PRR contender's share of the vote increases (H2); and

(H3), the PRR's success is due to strategic miscalculations made by the political mainstream, particularly that repeating a previously successful accommodative strategy will necessarily lead to the desired outcome in the future.

Electoral breakthrough and consolidation of voter support

FN was founded in October 1972 by members of a revolutionary nationalist movement under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen. Since its creation, the party embraced a version of cultural racism based on a denial of human equality and on defending national identity against the inferior cultures of immigrants. Consequently, Le Pen demanded a complete stop to further immigration and the deployment of a '*préférence nationale*', that is, priority should be given to French citizens in the labour and housing markets, as well as in the attribution of welfare support (Shields, 2007). FN's electoral breakthrough came in the mid-1980s, initially in the 1983 local elections at Dreux where the party's candidate – François Drupat - won the second ballot; and then in the 1984 European Parliament (EP) election, where FN secured 10.95 per cent of the vote. Le Pen's ascension was consolidated in the 1986 legislative elections where FN obtained 9.8 per cent of the vote and formed a heterogonous parliamentary group of 35 members.

Nonetheless, the reintroduction of the two-ballot system in the 1988 legislative elections meant a significant reduction in support. But FN's electoral entrenchment progressed throughout the 1990s, with a strong performance at the 1993 legislative elections and with Le Pen obtaining 15.27 per cent of the vote in the first round of the 1995 presidential election. Furthermore, the party proved its ability to impose triangular competition with the French mainstream after obtaining 15.3 per cent of the vote in the 1997 parliamentary elections and then 15 per cent in the 1998 regional elections (Shields, 2007). Through the maintenance of its candidates in the second round, FN imposed a tripartition of French politics and divided the right-wing vote in favour of the centre-left. However, serious intra-party divisions emerged both within the centre-right and the FN itself.

In the face of this strategic dilemma, the RPR leadership and President Chirac imposed the isolation of Le Pen's party, but three centre-right governors on the regional level were elected on the basis of electoral agreements with FN. Parallel to this, an internal cleavage emerged within FN over the adoption of an office-seeking strategy, which implied the

moderation of the party's core ideology. Le Pen's refusal to drop his hostility toward the French mainstream in favour of an accommodative strategy led to a large-scale purge of his detractors within the party. Following this event, support for FN collapsed at the 1999 EP elections, where its share of the vote was reduced to 5.74 per cent (Hainsworth and Mitchell, 2000). The internal split thus led to a significant electoral downturn, which raised questions over FN's short term future and overshadowed Le Pen's candidacy in the 2002 Presidential elections. Nonetheless, Le Pen managed to reverse the bleak electoral prospects in the early 2000s, as seen in the following section.

The 2002 Presidential elections: a political earthquake

The 2002 ballot was marked by five years of co-habitation between the centre-right President Chirac and a centre-left government led by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. This institutional context contained strong repercussions on the electoral dynamics for this election. First, the cooperation between the President and the Prime Minister diminished the legitimacy of Jospin's potential adoption of an adversarial stance towards Chirac during election campaign. Second, the outcome of the first round was foreseen to lead to a subsequent duel between Chirac and Jospin, which hampered the mobilisation of the French electorate and enhanced the observation of a protest vote which would favour the FN (Parodi, 2002). Thereby, the institutional background of the 2002 ballot provided a favourable context for Le Pen's candidacy.

Surveys further indicated that one third of the respondents highlighted unemployment as their top priority issue, followed by 20 per cent who emphasised law and order issues¹ (PEF, 2002). Immigration was ranked as the fourth issue (7 per cent), whilst the association between this topic and delinquency was reportedly low (Cautrès, 2003). Public hostility towards immigration was however high, as almost two thirds (60 per cent) considered there to be too many immigrants (PEF, 2002). Therefore, the intense public concern and opposition towards immigration in 2002 enhanced the potential diffusion of

¹ The intense salience of insecurity was associated with the media's overwhelming focus on this topic from May 2001 onwards and to the agency of the centre-right President. Under pressure from judicial investigations on charges of corruption as Mayor of Paris, Chirac counter attacked with a violent attack of the PS government's inertia on security in mid-June 2001 (Bacquè and Courtois, 2003).

FN's anti-immigration discourse. The following sections will review those policy choices adopted by FN and the French mainstream on immigration control and on integration.

FN's 2002 campaign directly benefited from the high salience of insecurity across public opinion. In parallel to this development, FN enjoyed intense levels of media coverage² during the first round, coupled with an indifferent treatment from journalists, a trend which further enhanced the banalisation and normalisation of Le Pen's discourse (Mercier, 2002). The party manifesto flagged up immigration as a key issue and was clearly driven by anti-immigration and xenophobic stances (see Figure 1.). On immigration control, for example, FN pledged to halt *all* forms of legal immigration, including family reunion and asylum, as well as promising to proceed with the forced removal of all irregular migrants settled in France. Under the headline of 'Immigration: the mortal menace to France and the French', the party expressed strong antipathy towards the 'formation of closed communities, constituted on ethnic grounds' (FN, 2002). Furthermore, their manifesto stated how 'massive immigration//...//threatens our national identity and the existence of France as a nation. Accordingly, migrants wishing to naturalise would need to evidence that they have assimilated into the 'spiritual values, customs, language and practices underlying the French civilization' (FN, 2002).

A significant level of intra-party division could however be observed across the French centre-right prior to the 2002 ballot. In 1999, the former Prime Minister Edouard Balladur proposed the creation of a parliamentary commission to consider the FN's proposal of '*préférence nationale*' regarding welfare benefits. This lenient approach would thus suggest an accommodative strategy, at least by a faction of the French centre-right party. Nonetheless, the potential co-option of FN's electoral programme embarrassed the remainder of the centre-right and was publicly vetoed the RPR leadership. This rejection reflected Chirac's preference to depoliticise the immigration 'issue', in agreement with Jospin's proposal for a 'Republican Pact'. The socialist government thereby managed to defuse the question of border management whereas integration increased in salience (Bernard et al., 1999). As Weil (2005) notes, the French centre-right adopted a consensual approach on immigration control and shifted its focus towards migrant integration by the end of the 2000s.

² Le Pen enjoyed two hours of TV coverage throughout three months of the pre-electoral campaign in opposition to the 25 minutes enjoyed during the entire year of 2001 (Gerstlé, 2002)

Given the prevalence of Chirac's faction within the UMP, the 2002 manifesto evidences the party adopting a dismissive strategy. Thus, immigration and integration were largely absent in the incumbent President's campaign in between rounds, however, Chirac presented himself as the defender of the Republic against the extremism posed by FN's candidate (Berezin, 2009). Nonetheless, the centre-right candidate dropped the dismissive strategy largely as a consequence of Le Pen's success. At a subsequent party rally, Chirac assured the electorate he had received the message conveyed by the outcome of the first round and added that -

‘An assembled and diverse France, is a France that learns to make men and women of all backgrounds live together. I realize this is not always the case in reality. The solution is not a fall for a communitarian temptation, which pits French citizens against each other, and places membership of a social group, or of a religion before being a citizens’. (Chirac, 2002)

Chirac's further emphasis on the lack of respect for gender equality was a covert reference to the Muslim population settled in France. To tackle this problem, Chirac proposed the ‘renewal of the integration model’ and ‘the strict enforcement of our laws, especially against irregular immigration’ (ibid, 2002). These statements served to legitimise FN's association between immigration and the observation of an integration ‘crisis’ at the domestic level. This shift suggests the UMP candidate adopting an accommodative strategy in order to appease particular segments of the electorate who may be leaning towards the FN

The centre-left candidate - Jospin - conversely adopted an adversarial stance at the start of his term with the announcement of a new Republic Pact. Accordingly, ‘nothing was more alien to France than xenophobia and racism’ (Jospin, 1997). One of the first initiatives undertaken by the centre-left government consisted of a regularisation process that benefited around 80,000 irregular migrants (Weil, 2005). Despite the initial liberal approach, the new laws on French citizenship and on immigration control (in 1997 and in 1998 respectively) fell short of Jospin's electoral pledges to abolish past legislations set by the centre-right governments. These developments would thus suggest a moderation of Jospin's initial adversarial stance in favour of a more consensual approach

towards the centre-right. Nonetheless, these legislative processes fostered internal tensions within the left-wing coalition which supported the PS government, and which came to have significant repercussions on Jospin's aspirations at the 2002 ballot (Hollifield, 2004). On integration policy, the government's term was marked by strong inaction and an inability to perceive the increasing politicisation of this topic (Weil, 2005).

In the election campaign of 2002 the incumbent Prime Minister converged with his centre-right opponent over the adoption of a dismissive strategy regarding immigration control. Thus, the PS manifesto was stripped of any references to Jospin's record in office, whilst the party's proposals were reduced to merely stating 'better immigration controls (PS, 2002). On integration, the Socialist candidate recovered an old proposal by former President Mitterrand, which was to extend local voting rights to foreign citizens legally settled in France for more than five years (PS, 2002). This measure has been interpreted as a symbol of the PS's long-standing commitment to migrant integration. And while the proposal was never fully implemented, it nevertheless signalled a stance against the FN position (Meguid, 2008). A provisional bill was passed in the National Assembly in 1998, but Jospin prevented further discussion in the Senate, where it would have been vetoed by a right-wing majority (Parienté, 2012). Thus, Jospin failed to detach himself from the right-wing parties on the topic of integration. PS's strategy on immigration and integration were thus closely associated with Jospin's campaign focus, namely to present himself as a centrist candidate embodied by his slogan: 'My project is a modern one, not socialist' (Jaffré, 2003).

A political earthquake was consequently observed in 2002. Le Pen emerged as the second most voted for candidate in the first round with 16.86 per cent of the votes. In context of a low turnout (72%), Le Pen benefited from a recovery of FN's core supporters. Contrastingly, Chirac obtained 19.9 per cent of the vote which was the worst ever result by a president seeking re-election. Moreover, Jospin only collected 16.18 per cent of the vote, a disastrous result pointing to a failure of the incumbent to rally the centre-left vote in his favour.³ The second round was framed as a referendum on Le Pen and as a defence of Republican values. Thereby, an intense electoral mobilisation was observed, and Chirac obtained an overwhelming majority with 82 per cent of the vote against the 17.8

³ Only 47 per cent of PS sympathisers voted for the centre-left candidate (Duhamel, 2008)

per cent by Le Pen. The FN's results in between rounds indicated Le Pen's inability to expand his electoral share beyond the far right fringe (Miguet, 2002).

The convergence of the French mainstream on a dismissive strategy, and the lack of any positional divergences was subsequently followed by a strong performance by FN in the 2002 election (H1). Thus, the absence of restrictive and assimilationist stance by the political mainstream may have enhanced the appeal of FN's anti-immigration discourse (H2). Parallel to this, a high level of agenda friction could also be identified, especially in terms of the choices provided by mainstream parties' and regarding the level of public concern and hostility towards immigration (H3) (PEF, 2002). As the electoral surveys suggest, Le Pen's issue-ownership was overwhelming, as half of the respondents who were most concerned with immigration also ranked Le Pen as the best candidate to deal with this issue (H3). By contrast, Chirac and Jospin collected 4.1 per cent and 1.1 per cent respectively which indicated a complete failure to challenge ownership (PEF, 2002). The next section explores the FN's electoral downturn in 2007.

The 2007 Presidential elections: Le Pen's slump

The 2007 election unfolded against a backdrop featuring the 'No' victory at the 2005 European Constitution referendum, and President Chirac and the UMP government's deep unpopularity. Participation was expected to be high, as a vast majority of French voters considered the 2007 ballot to produce substantial changes in their lives and circumstances (Sauger, 2009). Public interest was also enhanced by the fact that both mainstream candidates had never contested a presidential ballot before, which represented a generational shift in French politics. In terms of public attitudes, surveys indicated unemployment as a top priority followed by social inequality and purchasing power (PEF, 2007). Immigration, conversely, was ranked seventh, a significant decline compared to 2002 (PEF, 2002; 2007). Likewise, public hostility towards immigration had also dropped, as only half of the respondents agreed with the statement there were too many migrants in France.

Le Pen's success in the first round represented a pyrrhic victory as the second round made FN's deep isolation beyond the far-right fringe evident. Consequently, a credibility deficit was identified by the FN leadership that enhanced the adoption of a 'dédiabolisation'

strategy led by Marine Le Pen to moderate the party's image. This strategy was evident at Le Pen's speech at Valmy in 2006 and in his appeal to the 'French of foreign origins', indicating a broader conception of nationhood than the one previously held. Furthermore, references to national identity and immigration were restricted to the preface of the manifesto (FN, 2007). Nonetheless, FN maintained its anti-immigration stances, as this social phenomenon was framed as 'social dumping' and a source of drain on the welfare state, which, again, fostered the adoption of a '*préférence nationale*' policies (FN, 2007). In addition to the suppression of family reunification, FN demanded an abolition of a common EU policy on immigration (FN, 2007). On integration, the party maintained an assimilationist stance regarding naturalization alongside a rejection of communitarianism and of any positive discrimination of migrants and ethnic minorities. In short, FN's electoral pledges encompassed anti-immigration positions and the adoption of '*préférence nationale*' policies but the content of this discourse was beginning to shift.

The electoral 'earthquake' of 2002 had further repercussions for French immigration and integration policies as President Chirac appointed Nicolas Sarkozy as the Minister of Interior, an UMP member known for his hard-line approach on law and order. The 2003 law aimed to tackle supposed integration 'failures' and introduced a '*Contrat d'accueil et d'intégration*' (CAI, Contract of Reception and Integration) aimed at labour migrants. After winning the UMP presidency in 2004, Sarkozy unveiled a paradigm shift entitled 'Selective Immigration for Successful Integration'. Sarkozy announced his rejection of demands for a 'zero-immigration' policy and instead promoted a stance which aimed at selecting migrants, particularly highly skilled ones at the expense of 'unwanted' migrants, especially family reunification and asylum seekers. Thereby, the UMP leader proposed an expansion of labour immigration to half of the total of new entries through the deployment of a quota system. To tackle the 'crisis of the Republican model of integration', Sarkozy suggested widening the application of CAI to all newcomers and the establishment of positive discrimination in favour of immigrants.

By announcing his paradigm shift involving a 'selective immigration policy', Sarkozy adopted an accommodative approach and framed family reunification and asylum as unwanted types that needed to be restricted. This approach was, however, followed by the adoption of an adversarial stance on integration through the proposal of positive discrimination. Moreover, the paradigm shift indicated Sarkozy's intention to portray his political programme as a 'rupture' with Chirac's legacy for the 2007 presidential

elections. Nonetheless, Sarkozy's plans created tensions within the UMP and were vetoed by President Chirac. This intra-party conflict reinforced Sarkozy's image as an outsider within the government, which enabled him to remain immune to Chirac's unpopularity whilst his image of a statesman was reinforced. Notwithstanding the presidential veto, Sarkozy reformed legislation once more to promote a watered-down version of his new paradigm with the introduction of a new labour visa requirement for highly skilled immigrants, alongside restrictions on family reunification, and the introduction of CAI to all newcomers. Sarkozy's accommodative strategy was furthered after his nomination as the UMP candidate for the 2007 presidential elections (Carvalho, 2016a).

Unlike the two-pronged approach presented in 2005, UMP's 2007 manifesto indicated a clear shift towards restrictive and assimilationist stances (Table 3). Notwithstanding previous intra-party divisions, Sarkozy recovered the deployment of a quota system to manage inflows and demanded the imposition of integration criteria to regulate entrance of newcomers. Moreover, the earlier proposal to deploy positive discrimination was dropped and replaced by the creation of a ministry of immigration and national identity (UMP, 2007). The framing of immigration as a threat to national identity had been a cornerstone of FN's cultural xenophobia, but, nonetheless, this topic became the second major theme of Sarkozy's electoral campaign. According to the centre-right candidate, 'France is undergoing a crisis//...//an identity crisis' that is associated with irregular migration and 'with those who fail to integrate into French society' (Sarkozy, 2007). Thus, Sarkozy informally co-opted the FN's cultural xenophobia. In short, the UMP adopted an accommodative approach in 2007 in contrast to the dismissive strategy pursued in 2002.

Jospin's disastrous result in 2002 left PS in internal disarray under the leadership of first secretary François Hollande. This internal crisis was deepened by intense intra-party divisions over the EU, as observed in the 2005 referendum (Knapp and Sawicki, 2008). Likewise, the centre-left party evidenced significant degrees of division over immigration control with the public dissemination report authored by Malek Boutih, the former president of *SOS Racisme*. The document suggested an accommodative approach with proposals of adopting a quota system, the end to the automatic right to family reunification and the suppression of dual citizenship (Boutih, 2005). The strategic dilemma presented by FN thus incentivised a faction of PS to adopt the far right's

electoral programme. Nonetheless, these proposals caused deep embarrassment within the centre-left party and Hollande vetoed a public debate to prevent further divisions.

The PS candidate for the 2007 presidential elections – Ségolène Royal - elaborated her electoral platform on the basis of a ‘participatory campaign’ and an internet website. From a general perspective, the PS proposals were inspired by both liberal and multicultural approaches (Table 3). Regarding immigration control, Royal counterbalanced the respect for family reunification and asylum seeking with a commitment to close French borders to irregular immigration (PS, 2007). She proposed the promotion of cooperation with countries of origin through the deployment of a ‘shared immigration’ paradigm against Sarkozy’s selective immigration policy. The PS proposal encompassed a system of multiple entries in exchange for international agreements regarding the readmission of irregular migrants (PS, 2007). On integration, PS adopted a multicultural stance with proposals to fight all forms of discrimination and intolerance, and to liberalise access to citizenship (PS, 2007).

However, Royal’s statements throughout the electoral campaign exhibited a significant level of contradiction. Notwithstanding her opposition to Sarkozy’s proposal for a new ministry of national identity, the PS candidate made extensive public references to the promotion of patriotism, the importance of the tricolour flag, and of the national anthem (Dargent and Barthélemy, 2009). These references were characteristic of the French approach that emphasised assimilation but unusual for a centre-left candidate, which thus fostered public perception of migrants’ integration into the French society as ‘problematic’. By contrast, Royal vehemently opposed Sarkozy’s ‘selective’ immigration policy due to the brain-drain effect it would have on sending countries (Royal, 2007). Overall, electoral strategy encompassed a more adversarial approach towards the right-wing parties. The lack of political consistency should be associated with Sarkozy’s emphasis on national identity and the overall portrayal of Royal’s strategy as ‘directionless’ (Gaffney, 2010).

Two events marked the first round of the 2007 presidential elections, namely, the outstanding performance by UMP candidate and the electoral downturn experienced by FN. Sarkozy was the uncontested winner, with 31.2 per cent of the vote against the Royal’s 25.9 per cent which represented one of the strongest scores observed in a presidential election (Cautrès and Cole, 2008). As widely noted, Sarkozy’s impressive vote share was only made possible due to the electoral mobilisation of FN sympathisers

in favour of his candidacy. In the context of a high turnout (83.3 per cent), Le Pen only obtained 10.4 per cent of the vote, his weakest score in presidential elections since the 1980s. Electoral studies estimate that Le Pen only retained 54 per cent of his voters from the first round of the 2002 ballot, an electoral decline that thus benefited the centre-right candidate. Sarkozy obtained the support of 26 per cent of Le Pen's 2002 voters in the first round, whilst Royal only attracted 5 per cent of those voters (Mayer, 2007).

In the second round, Sarkozy was nominated French president, with a total of 53.1 per cent of the vote against Royal's 46.9 per cent (Cautrès and Cole, 2008). This electoral shift in favour of the UMP was closely associated with Sarkozy's accommodative strategy of FN policies even though the FN candidate was still perceived as the best at handling the immigration 'issue'. Still, Le Pen was now closely followed by Sarkozy, who was considered the best candidate on immigration control (32.2 per cent), with Royal's support only amounting to 8.7 per cent (PEF, 2007). Therefore, Le Pen's issue-ownership was overtly challenged by the centre-right candidate. Similarly, Sarkozy's proposal for the creation of a ministry of immigration and national identity was consensual among FN voters, though it divided the general electorate (Carvalho, 2016a). Faced with a similar electoral platform on immigration control and integration, an important segment of the FN's 2002 voters considered Sarkozy the most effective candidate to enforce his political pledges.

Public polls also indicated a widespread consensus among UMP and FN voters for Sarkozy's statesman-like qualities and for his commitment to promote a rupture with past policies (Mayer, 2007). Thereby, Sarkozy's higher level of political capital, compared to that of Le Pen, was a key factor behind the success of the centre-right's accommodative strategy in 2007 (H2). From a sociological perspective, FN's electoral slump was also associated with a reduction in the potential pool of far-right voters due to the decline in public hostility towards immigration (Jaffré, 2008). Consequently, the level of agenda friction between public and party 'wants' was reduced (H3). Furthermore, electoral surveys suggested how FN's long term issue-ownership had been effectively contested by mainstream parties (H3). Finally, the UMP's strategic shift on immigration control was overtly aimed at tackling FN's electoral inroads, while the contradictions found in Royal's stance on integration were driven by Sarkozy's emphasis on national identity.

The 2012 presidential elections: the FN's upturn under Marine

The 2012 elections took place against a backdrop of economic decline following the financial crisis. In this context, electoral surveys highlighted the hegemony of economic concerns among the electorate (Mayer, 2013). Unemployment (17 per cent) was thus ranked as the most important issue, followed by reducing the public deficit (14.2 per cent). By contrast, immigration only scored 2.5 per cent (PEF, 2012). Similarly, public hostility towards immigration had declined significantly, as 52.4 per cent of the respondents disagreed that there were too many immigrants in France (PEF, 2012). Electoral mobilisation was robust, as a vast majority of the French voters declared their interest in the ballot and their intention to cast a vote (Muxel, 2013).

Elected as her father's successor in January 2011, Marine's appointment signalled a transformation of the party aiming to mainstream its electoral appeal. This objective would necessarily entail a process of ideological moderation, and Marine benefited from extensive media coverage focused on her '*de-diabolisation*' strategy (Piar, 2013). Nonetheless, the 2012 electoral programme maintained FN's hostility towards immigration and the assimilationist stances observed in the past. FN proposed cutting annual rates from 200,000 to 10,000 and privileging 'talented migrants', which suggested abandoning past policies of zero-immigration. Special attention was given to the deportation of irregular immigrants, to the suppression of exceptional regularisation procedures, and to the interdiction of public rallies in their support. A reform of French nationality laws was proposed which would remove the *ius solis* principle and abolish possibilities to dual citizenship (FN, 2012). As a sign of these attempts to moderate the party, FN's manifesto lacked any references to national identity and asylum, and extended the application of the '*préférence nationale*' to all French citizens, independently of their origin (FN, 2012).

Running for re-election, President Sarkozy's prospects were very bleak due to his persistent low rates of popularity, a consequence of the negative incumbency effect. During his presidential term, Sarkozy adopted a 'bling-bling' posture, with personal excesses combined with a hyperactive style which involved direct intervention in policy affairs (Cole, 2013). Despite early successes at the European level, Sarkozy failed to implement the announced rupture with past approaches to immigration control and integration. Two U-turns can thus be observed regarding the 2007 pledges, the

suppression of the ministry of immigration and national identity and the dropping of a selective immigration policy. Furthermore, Sarkozy's agenda accumulated to successive setbacks due to the divisive and controversial character of his proposals. The quota system, based upon country of origin, was rejected by a parliamentary commission led by UMP Senator Pierre Mazeaud. Furthermore, the President's decision to proceed with a programme of large-scale removals of EU citizens of Roma origin fostered intense opposition from the UMP Prime Minister François Fillon and other members of the cabinet.

Intra-party divisions over immigration control resurfaced in 2011. Following the deployment of a new policy aimed at reducing regular immigration, the UMP government issued an Administrative decree (Circulaire 'Guéant') depriving foreign students of a temporary residence permits after completing their studies (Carvalho, 2016b). These measures received widespread criticism including from the Minister of Higher Education – Valérie Pécresse - and from the former centre-right Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin. Furthermore, the topic of foreign students enhanced Hollande's adversarial strategy towards the incumbent's record of accomplishment. As a consequence of his unpopularity, Sarkozy's campaign for re-election included a number of radical measures to attract media coverage and to divert attention from his (lack of) achievement (Piar, 2013). Sarkozy announced the promotion of a chain of national referendums, including a plebiscite on the end of judicial supervision of immigration control, especially of the irregular variety (Vincent and Zappy, 2012). This measure indicated that Sarkozy prioritised opposition to immigration as the party's top priority for the 2012 election.

Thereby, UMP's 2012 manifesto proposed cutting net migration by half, subordinating the right to family reunification to assimilationist criteria, and the potential withdrawal from the Schengen convention (UMP, 2012). This electoral campaign was considered more accommodative of FN's restrictive and assimilationist stances than that of 2007. This trend was also evident in Sarkozy's anti-immigration remarks made on TV, in which he stated that 'the integration system is failing because there are too many migrants on our territory' (Le Figaro, 2012). Furthermore, Sarkozy's claims that Marine's candidacy 'was compatible with the Republic' fostered a further normalisation of FN's discourse (Mondon, 2014). In between the two rounds, Sarkozy escalated his strategy to accommodate FN's proposals, and stated that he was in favour of an '[EU] communitarian

preference, so I do not see why we could not be for national preference', a direct reference to the welfare chauvinism of FN (Schneider, 2012).

In contrast to previous ballots, immigration and integration became more salient issues when PS internally nominated presidential candidates. The candidate representing the party's right-wing faction – Manuel Valls - proposed the deployment of a quota system to manage migration flows and referenced CAI to emphasise the importance of acquiring language skills (Nouvel Observateur, 2011). The centre-left's shift in a restrictive and assimilationist direction put the party closer to UMP and FN's positions and was no longer the cause of embarrassment that it had been in 2005. This move would thus suggest a growing normalisation of FN's discourse within key mainstream parties. Nonetheless, Hollande removed immigration as a core issue during his 2012 campaign. In general, he opted to deploy a moderate strategy to maintain his lead in the polls and to capitalize on Sarkozy's unpopularity (Piar, 2013). Thus, PS's 2012 manifesto contained relatively few references to immigration and integration.

In order to detach himself from the incumbent's track record, Hollande proposed suppressing the controversial decree on foreign students. Moreover, the centre-left candidate recovered the old proposal to grant voting rights at local elections to foreign citizens (PS, 2012). These pledges were simultaneously followed by reassurances of a strong commitment to tackle irregular immigration (PS, 2012). But in-between rounds, the PS candidate adopted a more restrictive stance, under pressure from Sarkozy's critiques of laxity on immigration control. Hollande denied that the practice of detention of irregular migrants would be rendered exceptional and proposed a reduction of labour immigration with the introduction of annual quotas set by parliament (Laurent, 2012). This suggestion was reminiscent of Sarkozy's 2007 proposal for a 'selective' immigration policy. By closing ranks with the UMP's restrictive stance Hollande consequently adopted a triangular strategy designed to occupy the middle ground and to push the centre-right further rightward (Finchelstein, 2013). This tactic assisted Hollande's victory, as Sarkozy's proposals were increasingly perceived too divisive by the French electorate

Hollande emerged as the winner of the first round in 2012 election, and received 28.63 per cent of the vote, while the incumbent obtained 27.18 per cent (Murray and Kuhn, 2013). Surprisingly, electoral support for FN climbed to 17.9 per cent in the context of a high voter turnout (79.48). Moreover, Marine gained 2.7 million more votes than the 4.5

million obtained by Le Pen in 2002 (Mondon, 2014). Thus, the 2012 ballot represented FN's highest electoral score in a French presidential ballot. In the second round, Hollande was elected French President with a slight majority of 51.64 per cent against the 48.36 per cent obtained by the UMP candidate (Kuhn and Murray, 2013).

Sarkozy benefited the most from voter volatility, capturing 57 per cent of Marine's first round supporters, but failed to rally centrist voters in his favour. By contrast, PS benefited from the support of more than one third of centrist voters plus an important share of FN's electorate at the second ballot (17 per cent of FN voters) (Jaffré, 2013). UMP's rightward drift may have prevented a stronger electoral defeat, but failed to contest issue-ownership and further managed to alienate moderate voters. Notwithstanding the incumbent President's overwhelming focus on immigration, Marine was perceived as the best candidate by two thirds of the voters most concerned with this issue. By contrast, Sarkozy and Hollande were ranked by 19.4 per cent and 3.2 per cent of those respondents respectively (PEF, 2012). Consequently, UMP's accommodative strategy failed to challenge ownership or to prevent FN's remarkable electoral expansion (H3).

Aside from the context of economic decline, the failure of UMP's accommodative strategy was closely associated with a negative public image accumulated by Sarkozy during his term in office. Opinion polls indicated that the electorate ranked the incumbent president's ability to change the present circumstances as lower than that of Marine or Hollande (Finchelstein, 2013). Furthermore, Sarkozy was still less trusted by French voters than former Prime Minister Fillon was (Chiche and Dupoirier, 2013). The successive intra-party divisions over the immigration 'issue' also diminished the effectiveness of Sarkozy's agenda-setting regarding immigration control (Carvalho, 2016b). While the conflicts observed before 2007 enhanced his detachment from the preceding President's unpopularity, the successive political setbacks fostered public perception of the Sarkozy agenda as divisive with moderate voters feeling increasingly disaffected.

Regarding the hypothesis explored at the cross-national level, a reduced level of agenda friction can be identified in 2012 (H3). Thus, diminished levels of public concern and hostility towards immigration diverged from the significant salience garnered by this topic in the mainstream parties' electoral campaigns. As in 2007, the electoral programme UMP presented was clearly restrictive and assimilationist (H2), and failed to converge with PS's more liberal and multiculturalist approaches towards immigration and

integration (H1). Thus, FN's impressive electoral performance in 2012 cannot be associated with any intense agenda friction between political supply and public demands, or with the lack of restrictive and assimilationist mainstream alternative. Similarly, the lower levels of public concern and hostility towards immigration observed in 2007 failed to prevent the electoral upswing of FN in 2012. This deviation suggests how FN's rate of electoral mobilisation should not be interpreted as contingent upon a single-issue, namely on immigration and/or integration. Lastly, the 2012 presidential elections evidenced the risks of repeating an accommodative strategy towards the PRR contender that had proved successful in the past.

Conclusions

This chapter mapped the French mainstream parties' and the FN's electoral strategies on immigration control and on integration in the presidential elections. As argued, UMP shifted from employing a dismissive strategy in 2002 towards a more accommodative one in subsequent elections. Parallel to this, PS also dropped their dismissive strategy, initially deployed by Jospin in 2002, in favour of more adversarial approaches. Nonetheless, the 2007 presidential ballot was marked by several contradictions in PS's approach to migrant integration, unlike that of Hollande's triangular strategy in 2012. FN maintained its anti-immigration and assimilationist stances throughout the selected timeframe, but dropped obvious references to national identity from 2007 onwards and expanded its conception of nationhood. Consequently, party strategies have evolved over time instead of being static or reactive.

The degree of agenda friction - between intensity of public concerns and hostility towards immigration, and the salience of the aforementioned topics in the electoral campaigns - was acute in 2002, but declined substantially thereafter. This trend was associated with a contraction of public anxiety regarding immigration in 2007 as well as in 2012, whilst immigration control and integration policy became increasingly salient issues across the French mainstream's campaigns. The convergence by the French mainstream on a dismissive strategy was followed by a strong electoral performance by FN in 2002. Nevertheless, divergence across mainstream strategies in 2007 and in 2012 coincided with a significant electoral downturn for FN in 2007 but also with the party's strongest achievement in 2012. Therefore, this investigation cannot establish any causal

relationships between levels of electoral support for FN and mainstream party convergence, nor with levels of agenda friction between political supply and public attitudes.

A positive relationship was however identified between UMP's accommodative strategy and FN's electoral slump in 2007. UMP's approach towards FN can therefore be seen as a successful attempt to incorporate the former's electoral platforms into the latter's. And this outcome was in conjunction with public perceptions of Sarkozy's stronger profile as a statesman compared to that of the discredited and ageing Le Pen. Therefore, proximity between mainstream and the PRR's electoral proposals appear to be important for understanding FN's electoral slump in 2007 in conjunction with Sarkozy's higher levels of political capital compared Le Pen's. Hence, this chapter emphasises contingent aspects of a successful accommodative strategy towards PRR-type contenders and their dependence on public perceptions of effectiveness amongst competing candidates. The 2012 election suggests that holding office might be an obstacle rather than constituting an opportunity to bolster the success of an accommodative approach. Therefore, the French case suggests that merely repeating a previously successful accommodative strategy may not necessarily lead to the desired outcome in the future.

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